Metro Council status up in air in wake of remap plan rejection

By MIKE DUNNE
Advocate staff writer

The Metropolitan Council reapportionment plan results in “impermissible retrogression” for black representation within the city and the “unnecessary packing of black populations” into two districts. The objections were partly because of opposition raised by the local Black Elected Officials Association. Frank Millican, head of that group, said Wednesday he was pleased with the Justice Department’s rejection. He has called a group meeting next week to refine a plan devised with four predominantly black districts. They will then present the plan to the council as an option.

Rejection of the councils merger raises serious questions as to future council votes as well as several other (See REMAP, Page 7-A)
Black Elected Officials Association and the League of Women’s Voters. Both groups came up with plans that would have carved out a fourth predominantly black district.

The Justice Department said council consolidation may be in the best interest of the parish, but in making such a change the parish must show that there has been no diluting of black voting strength.

While the black population makes up 31 percent of the parish population and 36 percent of the city population, about 70 percent of the blacks in the parish reside within the city limits, the Justice Department said.

The letter also cites what it says appears to be “unnecessary packing” of black populations into two districts while adjacent areas show racial compositions which could have given rise to an additional district where a black could be elected.

The effect of the Justice Department’s objection is to make consolidation, the reapportionment plan and the realignment of voting precincts “legally unenforceable,” the letter from William Bradford Reynolds of the Voting Rights Section of the Justice Department said.

The City and Parish councils had drawn up an 11-member redistricting plan last year prior to the electorate’s vote to create the Metro Council.

Prior to the charter change, the Plan of Government specified that there would be seven City Council seats. The number of parish seats would be determined by dividing the average population of city districts into the population of the parish outside the city limits.

When consolidation was approved, the council submitted a second plan to the Justice Department which defines the 12 districts.

The East Baton Rouge Parish School Board has a Justice Department-approved reapportionment plan that provides for only three predominantly black districts of its 12-district plan.

But adoption of the similar plan would throw about half of the current council into races against one another, making it politically distasteful.

Millican said that he will not attempt to have the school board district plan overturned.

“The School Board has enough problems at this time,” he said.